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ABSTRACT

This lecture discusses what the ghetto of the Negro novel may have been over the last 70 years. It is stated that as time has passed, the Negro novel has never varied from its basic composition, but it has elaborated upon that basic composition in varied ways. It has, it is believed, afforded us a picture of the Negro mind which reflects both a permanent cast of Negro thought and the sensitivity of that cast of changes in the Negro's immediate environment. (DB)

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The Ghetto of the Negro Novel: A Theme with Variations

Blyden Jackson

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BLYDEN JACKSON, professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, witnessed in person the final phase of the Harlem Renaissance of Negro writing when he spent part of the depression year 1931–32 as a graduate student in English at Columbia University. Born in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1910, he grew up in Louisville and took a B.A. at Wilberforce University. Between his beginnings at Columbia and his return to graduate study, he taught in a WPA night school and in junior high schools in Louisville. Launching his college teaching career at Fisk University in 1945, he earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Michigan. Dr. Jackson has served as professor of English, head of the Department of English, and dean of the Graduate School at Southern University. A specialist in Negro literature, he has written extensively on the subject for journals in the field of English and contributed articles on Negro writers to the *Encyclopedia Americana*. Honors he has held include Julius Rosenwald and University of Michigan fellowships, the presidency of the College Language Association, and the vice-presidency of the Southern Association of Land Grant Colleges and State Universities. He is chairman of the College Section of NCTE.

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In these days when more than a million and a half Negroes live in the five boroughs of New York City and another million on the Southside and elsewhere in Chicago, as well as scattered millions more in places like Watts and Hough, or even in Atlanta or New Orleans, it may be difficult to realize what the typical Negro has actually been for most of the time he has spent as an adornment of the American scene. What he has actually been is a figure of earth, not a denizen of the city streets. Until the Civil War he worked on a Southern plantation or in some job connected with a staple-crop economy dominated by the felt needs and the ethos of the class which is often called the planters of the Old South. After the war he got emancipated from the legal status of chattel slavery. He did not get emancipated from his Southern home. His life went on far too much as it had been before the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. He still lived in, or near, fields which were for him the theater of his daily toil. He was still largely the hapless victim of some white-man-boss. And when he lifted up his eyes to contemplate the horizons which surrounded him, he could still see only Southern sights, still hear only Southern sounds, and still find the farthest ranges of his physical universe only in the astronomy of a Southern sky.

Statistical data confirm, and document, the Southern agrarianism of the Negro throughout by far the greater part of his American existence. In 1870, at the first census after the Civil War, 92 percent of all the Negroes in America—I have somewhat rounded off all the figures which will follow—4,420,000 out of a total of 4,880,000, lived in the South, a South that was not composed primarily of towns. Thirty years, about a generation, later, at the turn of the twentieth century, out of 8,830,000 Negroes—almost twice as many, incidentally, as in 1870—7,920,000, 89 percent of the total, still lived in a South where they were still largely adjuncts of the Southern soil. Indeed, as late as 1930, even after the passage of another thirty years and

the coming of virtually another generation, 9,360,000, or 78 percent, of 11,890,000 American Negroes, still had not left the South and still, in most of their personal careers, were repeating much of the pattern of existence of their parents and grandparents, and great-grandparents.

Yet, when one turns from Negro life to Negro literature, and especially to the Negro novel, one may well experience almost immediately the shock of a sharp and powerfully arresting recognition. The Negro novel is a city novel. It almost always has been. It is not that the Negro novel lacks absolutely any connections with the rural South. But the contrast in it of its prevailing setting with the most apparent fact of Negro location in America is so almost incredibly enormous. The Southern agrarian setting does not even begin to appear in the Negro novel in any degree or to any extent commensurate with its actual, and, for a long time, virtually ubiquitous involvement with Negro life. The first Negro novel, *Clotel* (1853), concentrates as much on Richmond and New Orleans, and Washington, as it does on rural Mississippi. The second Negro novel, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), establishes by far the major portion of its action in Philadelphia. And all of the big Negro novels—big in terms both of their reputation and their influence—like *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, easily the two biggest of them all, tend to be either set within an urban ghetto or shaped and controlled by the culture of the town.

What accounts for this anomaly? Why are the memorable scenes of the Negro novel set in urban ghettos? Why are not these same scenes drenched instead with the physical atmosphere of the land of cotton, the rhythms of growing seasons in subtropical climes, the images of hoe hands and roustabouts and of Negroes walking down some lonesome Southern road? What must we know, or, at least, suspect, about Negroes, about their inner thoughts and their private lives, to understand what well may be the meaning of the Negro novel's obvious predilection

for the Negro ghetto and its apparently interrelated aversion to the Southern agrarian scene?

There is, of course, no certain answer. But it may help to recollect the old-time darky, he of whom the white folks were themselves so ecstatically enamored. He was, in provenience, a plantation Negro. And he represented everything which Negroes, given the freedom to express their unvarnished thoughts, viewed as the opposite of all of the ideas about themselves of which they approved. Happy-go-lucky, as docile as a child, and as uneducable, insensitive to slight and injury, this Negro satisfied the white man's fond hypothesis that Negroes were born to be enslaved. With the demise of slavery, therefore, this Negro belonged, for his own good as well as in the best interests of the state, within the strict confines of color caste. This Negro must never be permitted to think himself as good as any white man. "Would you want your daughter to marry one of them?" And so the "good" white man perpetuated, if not his plantation, at least his plantation legend. In song and story, as well as in the picture of God's universe which he instilled into every properly bred white child before that child could read or write, he kept alive the image of the right kind of Negro, who knew his place and stayed therein, whose head, like Old Black Joe's, was always bending low, and whose native habitat, as divine fiat had made it clear, was beneath the foot of every white man in that hierarchy of law and custom of which segregation was the keystone and discrimination the breath of life.

A libelous fraud was what Negroes called this darky. So much of him offended them that they could reconcile themselves to no attribute associated with him. Among other things, as we have seen, he lived in the agrarian South. Negro novelists, consequently, have tended to leave him there. Their Negro—the Negro of their very real subjective fact rather than of the white supremacist's self-hypnotic autistic thought—has been too hostile to the white man's racial creed to bask in the sunshine of any white man's supposedly seraphic South. And so, if it has served

no other function, the ghetto of the Negro novel has served the Negro novelist as an objective correlative for his disdain of the pretensions of color caste. Set this ghetto against the grinning darkies in blackface minstrelsy or the groveling black servitors of literature like "Marse Chan" and one has a physical setting which announces its dissent from the standard preferences of the cult of white skins *über Alles*. Surely as much as anyone the Negro novelist knows where Negroes have actually had their homes. Surely, too, he could have placed those homes in his fiction to correspond with actuality, in the rural South, just as, incidentally, he could have made his characters talk like "Brer Rabbit" or cut the fool like Stepin Fetchit. That he chose the ghetto as his symbol, rather than the plantation, is a deliberate act of some significance. It is probably also a most eloquent indication of his basic attitudes toward color caste, and a strong suggestion that he shares, or feels he shares, those attitudes essentially with all Negroes.

If, however, the ghetto of the Negro novel is thus the kind of dual revelation which it well may be, it is also, then, conceivably an entree into, not merely the consciousness of a group of artists, but also the collective consciousness of Negroes as a cohesive whole. One must thus assume, if only from the persistence of the ghetto in the Negro novel, a similar persistence among Negroes of disaffection with the plantation legend, as with the entire body of behavior and belief which that legend was created to make seem true. This disaffection constitutes a theme, an underlying diapason in perennial black reaction to the white man's world, which seems exempt from change. But themes, in life and literature, as in music, may be exposed to variation, without destruction of their fundamental character. The ghetto of the Negro novel is a theme that does retain its fundamental character. Always it speaks of how very much Negroes resent the indignities which America has forced upon them. Always it whispers, as it were, the words of Cinquez in one of the *Amistad* trials, "Give us free.

Give us free." [1] Always it calls for the end of one era of American life and the beginning of a genuine new day. But it has done this now for well more than three generations. And it has become a theme with variations. As time has passed, indeed, it has never varied in its basic composition. But it has elaborated upon that basic composition in ways that have in themselves been varied. It has thus afforded us, therefore, a picture of the Negro mind which reflects both a permanent cast of Negro thought and the sensitivity of that cast to changes in the Negro's immediate environment.

Before the Harlem Renaissance, the ghetto of the Negro novel was largely an explication of Negro resourcefulness in adjusting to a culture aggressively intolerant of Negroes. The years of this ghetto were, indeed, the years when Negroes had but little choice except to attempt mere brute survival, on terms acceptable to the dominant whites. The shape of the early ghetto of the Negro novel did acquire, then, to a great extent the shape of the Negro experience of life immediately pertaining to it. But with the Renaissance an external environment changed. The Renaissance itself celebrated an entity which it called the New Negro. This New Negro was a creature of hope and pride, an emblem of a race now not only able to survive, but also to boast of an innate capacity of its own for going beyond mere brute survival to the enjoyment, on terms supplied by itself, of the good things of life. And so the ghetto of the Negro novel of the Harlem Renaissance is the ghetto on a buoyant note. Wrong as has been color caste, bad as have been its ravages on Negro life, says this ghetto, they have hurt the Negro less than the scramble for gain and the repression of natural desires have dehumanized the American white. Inviolate against the Philistines and Babbitts, the Negro, it continues, has preserved his link with the world of healthy instinct. A familiar

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[1] William A. Owens, *Slave Mutiny: The Revolt on the Schooner Amistad* (New York: The John Day Company, 1953), p. 234.

strain in the novel of the Renaissance is the Negro who passes for white and then returns, a pilgrim from whose eyes the scales have fallen, to his own people. For joy, like the innocence of a good weekend romp at the Savoy, flourished in the ghetto of the Renaissance.

The urban North was then not only an escape. It was also the promised land. Like a country at the end of a rainbow, it was where Negroes, at last, could really be themselves. The South had inhibited them. And it had also kept close watch over them. In effect, in the South the "paterollers" were always there, seeing to it not only that Negroes did not get "uppity," but seeing to it also that Negroes never forgot that they were living in a white folks' world. How different, however, was the Northern Negro ghetto. It brought together a throng of Negroes who, from their very density, gained anonymity as well as a fraternal communion with each other. And so in the ghetto, away from the white folks' prying eyes and the example of the white folks' enervating ways, Negroes could talk Negro talk, laugh Negro laughter, indulge themselves in Negro ways of having Negro fun, and yet, in their serious moments, of which their self-controlled ghetto existence was far from entirely bereft, contribute to a common Negro conception of a better social order and join with other Negroes in efforts to make that conception, after all, come true.

Not for nothing, hence, did the titles of some novels of the Renaissance read as they do: *Home to Harlem, One Way to Heaven, The Walls of Jericho, Dark Princess, God Sends Sunday, Not Without Laughter.* The Negro novel of the Renaissance is, of course, not all of one piece. Sometimes it satirizes Negroes. Sometimes it pillories them. Its ghetto, too, has its sordid and forbidding aspects. Yet, even so, its ghetto is remarkably consistent in its proclamation both that Negroes are fine people and that in their new homes in the urban North they will build a new Jerusalem. The final scene of Langston Hughes' Negro novel of the Renaissance, *Not Without Laughter,* occurs

on a Chicago street. A summer night has softened the harsh daytime contours of Chicago's Southside. Sandy, the boy who approaches manhood in the novel, is walking home with his mother. Neither of them is Chicago-born, and both of them already know that the Chicago ghetto is far from perfect. But somewhere near them, in a small storefront church, a little band of black worshippers, in soft Southern speech, is singing an old Negro spiritual, "By and By." It is the ghetto of the Harlem Renaissance.

That variation of the ghetto, however, apparently was not to last, nor was the Negro mood which gave every evidence of sustaining it. The Harlem Renaissance was a phenomenon of the 1920s. In America the 1920s were followed by a Great Depression. Nowhere in America during the depression were soaring spirits the order of the day. In ghetto after Northern ghetto in "real life," moreover, Negroes, many of them migrants from the South, were discovering the shortcomings of the promised land. Out of that discovery, moreover, emanated the variation in the novelistic ghetto which may be found, among other places, in Richard Wright's masterpiece, *Native Son*, the ghetto which is almost surely the ghetto of the Negro novel in its classic form and which, in great likelihood, is nearer even to that form in Ann Petry's 1946 edition of *The Street* than in the *Native Son* to which *The Street* had over five years to assimilate itself. The ghetto of *Native Son* creates monsters. The message it conveys inheres not simply in the violence of its protagonist when he smothers to death, ostensibly by accident, white Mary Dalton. It is contained as deeply in the romantic aspirations of this protagonist and a black confidante of his when, idling along on a Chicago street, they playact at being white. And it finally comes home full force in the play, not novel, *A Raisin in the Sun*, when Lena Younger, using her recently deceased husband's life insurance (an irony that should not go unnoted), begins the purchase for her family of a house in white Clybourne Park, outside the ghetto, where her grand-

son may grow up free from the ghetto's effect of slow assassination on its occupants.

The ghetto of the Negro novel of the Age of Wright was the ghetto of unqualified integration. It marked the manner in which the ghetto as an exciting new frontier, the ghetto of the Harlem Renaissance, had turned into the ghetto of a city of dreadful night, the ghetto of *The Street*. And then it counselled what to do. It admonished escape. But that variation of the ghetto now also has had its day. To some extent it has been replaced by an act of retrogression, a return to the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance with his accent on the hypothesis that black is beautiful. To some extent, also, it is as aghast as the Age of Wright at the chamber of horrors which the original ghetto has now turned out to be. But it has rewritten the prescriptive portion of its script. Whether or not its ghetto is as nasty as some novelistic Negro ghettos have been, this ghetto is a citadel to be defended, not a disaster to be abandoned. It is in the role, then, of the ultimate in race patroits, the fighter to the bitter end, that the black narrator-protagonist of John A. Williams' *The Man Who Cried I Am* relays back across the Atlantic to a black separatist in America the contents of King Alfred, the contingency plan of the Government of the United States for the elimination, if need be, of all the blacks within its borders, "elimination" here, it should be carefully observed, having all the Nazi-atrocity connotations of Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau. It is in keeping, moreover, with a world so dichotomized that not only this narrator-protagonist and the black separatist to whom he talks, but also the hitherto unsuspecting white-looking black collaborator, a tool for espionage of the whites, who stumbles on a transcription of the relay, should all be destroyed by the lily-white technicians of the CIA, or some organization like it. For the narrator-protagonist's death and that of the black leader to whom he has communicated King Alfred, as well as, very especially, that of the black collaborator, do all but illustrate one sound conclusion:

the futility of trying to do business with the white man, the implacability of color caste, and the stern necessity for all blacks to realize how, only with their own kind, can they find trust and brotherhood, beauty and life, love, honor, and respect, and peace—the peace that whites will allow only to non-whites who servilely submit to white supremacy.

A theme with four variations is what the ghetto of the Negro novel may well have been over the last seventy years. This theme with its four variations may well represent also, with fair precision, the states of the Negro mind over that same period. Does anything other than a basic aversion to color caste underlie these variations and, if it does, is it present both in the ghetto of the novels and in the mind of the Negro people, whom obviously the ghetto and all Negro literature purport, and hope, to represent? I think it does. I think it is, and let me now, in closing, and in attempting to justify what I think, attempt also to speak, in my own person, as plainly and as simply as I can.

I believe all the variations on the basic theme in the ghetto of the Negro novel speak with a common voice whose modulations of any kind are more apparent than real. I believe all these variations demonstrate to a reader both a constantly more comprehensive awareness on the part of Negroes in America of the true nature of American color caste and a constantly increasing willingness on their part to accept the proposition that Negroes, if they wish to live in America at all, can reconcile themselves to no compromise with color caste, for, in color caste, there is, ultimately, no compromise with Negroes. The indispensable requirement of color caste is, of course, precisely what the words imply. All the members of the caste must be kept within the caste. Then, as those without, and, presumably, always above, the caste must agree, all the members of the caste may always be dealt with as if they were all made from one mould. If such a disposition seems a travesty upon democracy, it is. But it is also a perversion of any genuine belief in the value of humanity. Black

separatism at the moment is the modish variation of the Negro novelist's black ghetto. I do not believe in black separatism any more than I believe in color caste. Nor do I believe that either represents a final phase of black-and-white relations in America. On the other hand we can learn, I do believe, from the progression of mutation in the variations on the theme of the ghetto in the Negro novel. And what I think we learn is how much for whites color caste is an expensive luxury. If they must have it, I suppose they must. But surely the more they have of it, the less they may ever have of anything really worth the trouble of continuing to exist in a world where the only value without price is the value of humanity.

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